

# TRAINING THE MIND IN CALM-ABIDING

*His Holiness the Fourteenth Dalai Lama said of Geshe Lhundub Sopa,*

“He is an exemplary heir of Atisha’s tradition conveying the pure Dharma to a new world in an authentic and useful way. He has been a pioneer among those bringing Buddhism to the West.” One aspect of Geshe Sopa’s legacy is an extensive English-language commentary on Lama Tsongkhapa’s *Lamrim Chenmo*, called *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment*. Wisdom Publications has just published the fourth volume of this five-volume work. In it, Geshe Sopa, who was a teacher of both Lama Yeshe and Lama Zopa Rinpoche, offers a detailed discussion of *shamatha*, or calm-abiding.

In the book’s introduction, Geshe Sopa explains how this topic is situated within Tsongkhapa’s great-scope teachings on the graduated path to enlightenment:

So what are the trainings of bodhisattvas, those who have the bodhichitta goal? Perhaps foremost is the taking of the bodhisattva vow and then training in that. The bodhisattva vow contains within it all of the bodhisattva’s practices. This includes avoiding negative actions and training in the six perfections: generosity, ethical discipline, patience, perseverance, meditative stability and wisdom. We have discussed these perfections quite extensively in the previous volume and gone into many details on how bodhisattvas train, particularly in the first four of these.

Tsongkhapa dedicates the final two chapters of the *Lamrim Chenmo* to the last two perfections, meditative stability (*dhyana*) and wisdom (*prajna*). Almost half of the text involves how to train in the concentrated mind and in the wisdom knowing the ultimate truth of emptiness. Meditative stabilization is addressed specifically through the cultivation of calm-abiding, or shamatha, the mind resting in single-pointed focus. The perfection of wisdom is addressed through the cultivation of special insight (*vipashyana*) into emptiness. The present volume presents Tsongkhapa’s chapter on cultivating the serenity of shamatha, while volume 5 of this series presents the chapter on developing the insight called vipashyana.

Geshe Sopa begins chapter 1 of *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment, Volume 4*, with commentary on the lam-rim topics “the benefits of cultivating shamatha and vipashyana” and “how shamatha and vipashyana contain all states of meditative concentration” as explained by Tsongkhapa in *Lamrim Chenmo*. The following excerpt continues the commentary with the topics “the nature of shamatha and vipashyana” and “why it is necessary to cultivate both.”

GESHE LHUNDUB SOPA, MAITRIPA COLLEGE,  
PORTLAND, OREGON, US, 2009  
PHOTOS BY MARC SAKAMOTO





“

BODHISATTVAS STRIVE TO ACHIEVE SHAMATHA BECAUSE IT HAS A SPECIAL BENEFIT. ONCE YOU HAVE THAT MENTAL POWER, THE SENSES FOLLOW THE MIND.



# THE NATURE OF SHAMATHA AND VIPASHYANA

BY GESHE LHUNDUB SOPA

This third topic explains what shamatha and vipashyana are in general. Tsongkhapa begins his explanation of shamatha with a quotation from the *Sutra Unraveling the Intended Meaning*:

While you dwell in solitude and properly direct your attention inward, you attend to just those topics upon which you have carefully reflected. Your attention is mentally engaged by continuously attending inwardly. The state of mind wherein you do this and stay this way often, and in which both physical and mental pliancy arise is called *shamatha*. Therefore bodhisattvas strive to achieve shamatha.

This is a very pithy quote. “Topics upon which you have carefully reflected” refers to the instructions regarding the nine stages of shamatha training, a subject Tsongkhapa explains in detail later. It is most fruitful to cultivate this state of mind in a solitary place where your practice will not be interrupted. There you can internalize the nine stages of the development of shamatha. This is done by maintaining the focus and attention of your mind on its object. When your mind gets distracted, you simply bring your attention back to the object. You do not just let your mind wander.

The object of your shamatha meditation can be any of a number of topics discussed in the scriptures, such as impermanence, the four noble truths, and so forth. However, this is not an analytical form of meditation. If for example, the truth of suffering is your object, you do not analyze every aspect of suffering one by one; you just keep your mind attentive to the general suffering of existence in samsara. Whatever your object of concentration, you maintain that object in your mind without interruption. This is what is meant by “continuously attending inwardly.” You set your mind on the object and leave it there.

When you engage in this practice, try to maintain your attention for as long as you can. At first your mind may only be able to remain focused briefly because you will become distracted or sink into sleepiness. However, if you keep trying, eventually you will achieve a stabilized mind and be able to remain focused on your object for as long as you like. If you sit down for a meditation session intending to stay focused on your object for two hours and you are successful, that indicates a significant degree of mental stability.

When you achieve shamatha one result is incredible mental pliancy. Your mind follows your wishes and focuses wherever you like for as long as you like. Physical pliancy also increases in the sense that your body does not interfere with this mental pliancy. Once shamatha is achieved, there is no physical pain or discomfort to distract your concentration. A yogi who is well trained can control the subtle wind; this makes his or her body feel light. The mental power is so strong it almost feels like there is no body at all. This is the physical pliancy that accompanies the mental pliancy. These two pliancies produce a subtle feeling of bliss. The state of meditation that has the bliss of mental and physical pliancy is shamatha.

Bodhisattvas strive to achieve shamatha because it has a special benefit. Once you have that mental power, the senses follow the mind. Usually it is the other way around: the mind chases after whatever information is supplied to it by the senses. Under such circumstances the mind is always distracted. This is the common state of the mind in the desire realm. But when shamatha is achieved, your mental power is so strong that the senses’ power to disturb your mind is eliminated. Therefore Tsongkhapa calls this meditative state a “mental king” because with it you can rule your mind. All the accompanying mental factors are like subjects of the primary mind that is king. Thus, when you have shamatha, you can achieve many yogic skills. That is why the sutra says, “bodhisattvas strive to achieve shamatha.”

Introspection, or vigilance, is the main method for cultivating shamatha. It has two aspects. It introspectively examines the mind again and again, and it vigilantly checks to see whether the mind is still placed on the chosen object of meditation. I often refer to this as a spy who is watching the mind to see if it is still focused on its object. If it is not, then you must bring the mind back. Just as a spy uses various instruments like cameras and hidden microphones to track what his target is up to, you use vigilant introspection to keep tabs on your mind. Eventually, after enough training, the mind remains on its object without effort. It is a spiritual strength of mind.

Mental control is one of the key practices for a Buddhist practitioner. If your mind is not controlled, you create all sorts of problems that bring you misery and suffering. Everlasting peace comes from a mind that is able to free itself from ignorance and mental afflictions, and this requires mental control. When your mind is purified and free from all the obscurations and mental afflictions, you achieve the highest happiness or peace. Vigilant introspection is the basis for developing this mental control.

It is important to note that a person does not need to realize emptiness to attain shamatha. Someone who has developed shamatha has not necessarily cultivated insight and obtained high realizations. That is a separate matter. Non-Buddhists as well as Buddhists achieve shamatha. The achievement of shamatha



simply indicates having a mind that is able to remain focused on the object without distraction. It does not depend upon or entail a realization of the ultimate truth. But this does not mean that shamatha is not an important and excellent quality. All Buddhist yogis and yoginis must strive to have it. Without shamatha nothing much can be achieved. But shamatha alone is not enough either. It alone does not lead to freedom from mental afflictions, nor does it cut the root of ignorance.

## WHY IT IS NECESSARY TO CULTIVATE BOTH

The mental control that can remove all ignorance is divided into two: shamatha and vipashyana. As Tsongkhapa has said, shamatha – the stabilization of the mind – alone cannot remove all the obstacles because it does not know the nature of reality. To cut the root of the afflictions you must use a stabilized mind to cultivate the wisdom that truly, directly knows the way in which phenomena exist. This vipashyana, or insight, begins with analytical meditation that enables you to develop a valid conceptual understanding of reality. Analytical meditation is discursive; it involves thinking about a topic in many ways. When this wisdom is joined to shamatha, which is nondiscursive concentration, the mind becomes especially sharp. It is similar to drilling a hole in something; you endeavor to keep the drill precisely on the spot where you want the hole. Likewise, when shamatha keeps its focus on insight into the nature of reality, you can remove ignorance and mental afflictions. Vipashyana and shamatha have great power when combined together.

Mere shamatha is not sufficient for achieving either individual liberation from samsara or the Mahayana goal of perfect enlightenment for the benefit of others. Nor can those final goals be achieved by vipashyana alone. Tsongkhapa says that if it is dark and you want to see a painting clearly, then you need a butter lamp that both shines brightly and is undisturbed by wind. If the lamp is bright and clear but flickers in the wind, then you will not be able to see the painting clearly. If there is no wind, but the light from the lamp is weak, then you will not be able to see the painting clearly. In the same way, you can cultivate an understanding of emptiness – the ultimate nature of reality – using inference and logic, but the profound truth of emptiness is much clearer when seen through meditation. To have a direct realization of emptiness, you must have the very deep and profound meditation where all other senses, sense consciousnesses, and



thoughts stop, so that only one consciousness – the wisdom penetrating to the depths of the truth – remains. Only if you have the unshakable stabilization of shamatha combined with penetrating insight of vipashyana can you see reality clearly.

If you want mere temporary peace, shamatha alone can provide it. The cessation of all distracting and troubling thoughts is achieved by developing shamatha. But even if you have this deeply concentrated mind where all thoughts are suspended, it will not mean much and will not help much. For the root of our problems is ignorance, and thus the antidote to our problems must be wisdom. You need to remove from its roots your mistaken understanding and grasping at the true existence of self and phenomena. The reality of all phenomena is emptiness – the lack of true existence. You use the mind that abides undistracted by other objects to focus on an understanding of emptiness, the ultimate truth. Only a direct realization of emptiness will eliminate the source of your problems and give you true peace.

Dharmakirti makes a similar point in the second chapter of *Commentary on the “Compendium of Valid Cognition”* (2:222):

**Without disbelief in the object,**

**One will not be able to abandon it.**



Dharmakirti says that all our mental afflictions are rooted in misunderstanding. There is no way to remove the afflictions other than to realize the lack of inherent existence in objects, which we ignorantly grasp as real. For example, you may become very fearful if you mistake a rope coiled in the corner of a room to be a poisonous snake. It is ignorance, or a lack of proper understanding, that causes the fear since there is no real snake there. As long as you cling strongly to the conception that the rope is a snake, you are frightened. The only way to alleviate your fear is to correct your misconception. When you see the truth of the matter that there is no snake, you are completely free from fear. In the same way, as long as you grasp at the true or essential reality of phenomena, you will have the other mental afflictions.

In order to remove that ignorance, you must cultivate a direct understanding of the true nature of reality – emptiness. Because emptiness is very subtle and difficult to understand, you must begin by understanding it inferentially. Inferential understanding is an excellent starting point, but it is not clear enough to completely remove ignorance. By contemplating emptiness in combination with shamatha, you attain a direct realization of emptiness that penetrates more deeply. In brief, you first understand emptiness inferentially and then apply the stable

mind of shamatha to that understanding. If you do not have the wisdom knowing reality, you are like a person who sees the rope and thinks it is a poisonous snake. Even with a correct inferential understanding of emptiness, you are unable to see reality clearly enough to remove all your fear without the stabilization of shamatha.

Grasping the self of persons and phenomena is not immediately removed even with a direct realization of emptiness. Self-grasping is removed gradually as you get more familiar, through repeated meditation on emptiness. On the path of seeing, the accumulation of wisdom is accrued during meditation on emptiness, and in the postmeditation sessions the accumulation of merit is cultivated. If there is no shamatha accompanying your direct realization, later reflection when you attempt to integrate that insight will not be very clear. Thus you need both shamatha and vipashyana to gather the two accumulations of wisdom and merit and remove the afflictions and the self-grasping upon which they are based.

---

Excerpted from *Steps on the Path to Enlightenment: A Commentary on Tsongkhapa's Lamrim Chenmo, Volume 4*, by Geshe Lhundub Sopa with James Blumenthal, published by Wisdom Publications, 2015 ([wisdompubs.org](http://wisdompubs.org)). Used with permission.

---

**GESHE SOPA** worked on the *Steps of the Path to Enlightenment* series with his former Ph.D. students from the University of Wisconsin, Madison, in the United States. In addition to being a lharampa geshe, Geshe Sopa became a tenured faculty member at the university, where he served more than 30 years, training the first generation of Western Tibetan Buddhist scholars. James Blumenthal, who studied with Geshe Sopa and then went on to help found Maitripa College with Yangsi Rinpoche, served as editor of the fourth volume. Jim also regularly contributed pieces to *Mandala*.

In late August 2014, Geshe Sopa manifested the appearance of passing away at the age of 91. Six weeks later, Jim succumbed to complications from cancer at the age of 47. (Both of their obituaries are in *Mandala* January-March 2015.) In the “Editor’s Acknowledgments” for *Steps of the Path to Enlightenment, Volume 4*, Jim wrote, “Geshe-la is a teacher in all the best and most meaningful senses of the word. He is not only learned beyond compare, he perfectly embodies the teachings in his every deed as he skillfully passes them on to students with kindness, patience, wisdom and compassion. I will never be able to fully repay his kindness to me, but I hope my contribution to seeing this book to fruition will be a small start.”



**GESHE LHUNDUB SOPA WITH HIS STUDENT JAMES BLUMENTHAL AT MAITRIPA COLLEGE'S FIRST GRADUATION, PORTLAND, OREGON, US, 2009**